Elderhostel at Concordia University

The First Ten Years

1984-1994

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THE BEGINNING - 1983/1984

The original four person committee dedicated to bringing Elderhostel to Concordia was made up of three people whose interest in leisure was of long standing. Randy Swedburg, Director of Leisure Studies at Concordia and Ross and Margaret Seaman, both of whom had spent most of their lives with the YMCA, brought extensive experience in dealing with groups of people. In addition, Ross was the Director of the Community Recreation Leadership Training program at Dawson College. The other member, Doris Burns had been to two Elderhostels, one in Quebec City and one in Toronto, was a member of the Concordia Senior Student Association and had given many hours of volunteer work to the NDG Senior Citizens Council of Montreal. It made for a well-balanced group.

It was not simple to start the Elderhostel program at Concordia. In September of 1983, the committee members began their deliberations with the objective of offering a program in the summer of 1984. The first task for the committee was to sell the concept of Elderhostel to the university. The idea was to have a program that would retain a degree of autonomy while becoming an integral part of the university community. From the outset the objective was for Elderhostel to "pay it's own way" in terms of its real costs (i.e. residence, food services, etc.) while using the resources of the university (i.e. library, classrooms, etc.). The concept of Elderhostel was endorsed by senior administration from its inception. $2,500.00 was received as a start up grant from the university with the good wishes of

John O'Brien who was rector at that time.

The administrative end had to be learned too. It was quite surprising how much behind the scenes work there is. The head office of ELDERHOSTEL Canada publishes an excellent "Campus Coordinator Manual" which was used extensively. The coordinator is responsible for the program from start to finish and the administrative tasks are her/his responsibility with the hands-on support of the committee members. The success of Elderhostel from the beginning was due to a "team effort" with the campus coordinator, the committee, the staffs of Leisure Studies, residence, and the food services all "pitching in" to make it work.

From the beginning high standards were set for the Elderhostel Concordia program. Courses had to be at a university level and on subjects that would entice people to

come. Professors had to be comfortable working with older adults. Facilities at the residence were to be made as comfortable as possible, and the food (a most important part of the program) the best that could be arranged for.

After the first year we dispensed with the idea of using the cafeteria set-up for serving all meals. From then on lunch and dinner were served in our own dining area with our own menu. White table clothes and other extra touches added to the enjoyment of social contacts over a good meal for the Elderhostelers. Only breakfast was served in the cafeteria. This pattern has been maintained.

The residence - Well it was not the HILTON for sure, but we have been able to raise the service for our guests to a respectable level with the cooperation of

residence staff and the maintenance staff of the University. We were assured that our visiting friends will always be treated with every consideration and kindness.

Our program for the first three years was for two weeks. In these years we polished our presentation. We learned how to make things run smoothly from registration to closing; how to deal with emergencies of all kinds; how to diplomatically deal with personality problems; and most of all, how to relax and enjoy our clients who so quickly became friends.

Minor changes in our format have been made, the most important one was changing the course schedule. Two classes were held in the morning and one in the afternoon as set out in the Campus Coordinator's Manual. However, we noticed that we were losing

people in the afternoon class. They were out visiting Montreal. So we changed to two classes before lunch and one after dinner, thus leaving the afternoon free for educational visits.

THE COURSES

In planning our course material, we followed the outline given us from the Elderhostel head office. This list included most academic subjects so we had a wide field to choose from.

We were, however, influenced by the feeling that this was a golden opportunity to give our visitors a special insight into Montreal, the Province of Quebec and their place in the development of the North American continent. We did not however, want to sacrifice other types of stimulating programs, so we tried to include both these values.

To highlight the local culture we have offered courses in history, architecture, folk music, folk dancing, Quebec films and film makers, and a course which combined Canada's two official languages, French and

English.

To balance this we have offered some powerful courses entitled: Sexuality Then and Now; International Politics; Free Trade and World Environment. In addition, we have offered high interest courses: Tai Chi; Water Colour Painting; Producing an Animated Film; and courses in conjunction with special exhibitions at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. In addition, we have our star course "Jazz Jazz Jazz", now in its seventh year and given in conjunction with the Montreal Jazz Festival.

From 1985 the weekly offerings steadily increased to a high of eleven weeks. All in all, we calculate that we have had 1500 people attend our Elderhostel program between 1984 to 1994.

The course entitled "Montreal the World in a City" comes under the discipline of

History. People visiting Montreal want to learn more about the city and this course gives them many insights. It is a bright, amusing, informative, eye-opening affair, given by a person who feels deeply about Montreal. He has a right to since his ancestors farmed the land that Loyola Campus now stands on!

Every other year we offer a course on Montreal architecture given by a senior lady who has lectured and written extensively on this subject.

"Sexuality Then and Now" was a stirring course, and a little daring perhaps, but it was so well received that we repeated it three years in a row.

International Politics and Free Trade come under Political Science and hold a steady place in our menu.

Some programs, of course, did not stay

on our list, not because of lack of interest, but mainly because of difficulties in space or facilities. Water Colouring was a case in point. The wonderful teacher found it too difficult to try to teach 47 people, some of which were experienced and some were not. The same was true for "Making an Animated Film". But Tai Chi has stayed with us and is now in its sixth year.

Our star course "Jazz Jazz Jazz" is in a niche by itself. Clients come back year after year. In conjunction with the Montreal Jazz Festival, Elderhostelers have an intensive week of Jazz. The format is classes in the morning, and after lunch free time to attend any of the offerings including more than 100 free concerts. One of the highlights of this week is the Jam Session held on the lawn outside the library. We, Elderhostel Concordia, hire

three professional jazz musicians, and ask our visitors to bring their own instruments and play them. In 1993 we had seven jazz buffs who entertained us for three hours. With this program we fulfil our mandate of offering another discipline; Music. The professors, two inspired musicians in their own right are members of the university Jazz department.

All in all we do feel that we have fulfilled the Elderhostel ethic of offering a wide range of courses at a high academic level. We have also, we feel, have given people an insight into our culture here in Quebec, a view of the world outside, and perhaps made them laugh a little.

THE PROFESSORS

There is no question that the statement "the professor makes the course" is true and therefore the finding of suitable people to give courses for Elderhostel required careful thought.

When Elderhostel first started education for seniors was a relatively new field of teaching. One might find one or two older students in a regular university course, but with Elderhostel, the classes would be made up of people over the age of sixty who came from every background imaginable. Of great importance was their accumulated knowledge and life experience.

The Campus Coordinator's job was to find individuals mature in age, but still in the mainstream of teaching, confident in their subject matter, and not at all intimidated by the "experts" sitting in

front of them.

Then there was the question of explaining the concept of Elderhostel to potential professors. To go to an established academic and tell her/him that you want them to teach their subject as a course lasting five days at one and one-half hours a day, took a bit of explanation. Some of the professors seemed perfect for the courses we had in mind: the chair of the History Department at Concordia whose ancestors helped found Montreal; a well-known psychologist and sexologist, who gave the course on "Sexuality, Then and Now"; and a well-known authority on Jazz from the university Jazz department, who undertook to craft our Jazz program.

Our search to find teachers, for the various other programs we wanted to offer was simplified by an appeal to the Chairs of

Departments. For our course on Quebec film, we asked the help of the Chair of the Film Department; and for the Animated Film, the Chair of Communication Studies. As time went by and knowledge of Elderhostel grew throughout the University, our search for the best professors became easier. As the pleasure of teaching an Elderhostel course became known professors were much easier to recruit.

A core of professors have come back to us year after year, teaching those courses which we feel are important to our basic concept. Fresh subjects are offered each year and if successful will be repeated sometime in the future.

In asking for comments on teaching Elderhostel programs, one professor offered the following comment, which sums up the joy of teaching at Elderhostel,

> "When I entered the classroom there were all these senior people looking at me with years of coping with anything that came their way, including me. But after the lecture I was on cloud nine. What an amazing experience. They were lively. They were interested. They were curious. When I was wrong or boring they were compassionate. I made a large group of new friends who have been a joy to know".

Another commented,

> "I was told, 'it will be unlike any class you have taught before', and it was! It was infinitely rewarding and a worthwhile experience".

There are many other comments on file, all of which show that over the ten years of Elderhostel at Concordia, fulfilling relationships have been built between the professors and the participants. We know this will continue into the future.

THE VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers have always been an important part of Elderhostel. The participation of local seniors has added a great deal to the program. Elderhostel uses the idea of a live-in host/hostess and volunteers in many aspects of the programs.

Elderhostel Concordia volunteers are a very helpful group of people who have been involved in Elderhostel since it started in 1984, under the leadership of Leisure Studies Department, Concordia University. These volunteers included students, staff and people of the community. They help at registration and generally make people welcome.

Since the first year at Concordia we have had very able volunteers. Ross and Margaret Seaman were on our board, and brought to Elderhostel at Concordia years of

experience in dealing with groups of people and set up patterns for future volunteers to follow. Unfortunately Ross left us unexpectedly in 1987, but Margaret is still playing an active part in our program.

As the number of programs grew the need for more volunteers grew also. Between eight and ten people per week are needed and therefore we recruited by visiting and explaining Elderhostel to Senior Groups in the Montreal area, which resulted in a large number of people showing interest.

It was quite obvious that certain personalities were suited to certain kinds of service. We could see the necessity of developing an outline of each job and therefore we drew up job descriptions and held an open meeting for all those interested. This has resulted in a very strong group of volunteers who understand

their role and have become the backbone of the program.

Coordinating Elderhostel at many campuses can be a full-time, year round job, especially for a large program, but this position is usually filled on a part-time basis by a paid employee. However, at Concordia we have been fortunate to have a series of five people in this position for varying lengths of service who might be described as paid volunteers.

After the coordinator, the second most strenuous job is that of host/hostess. Duties begin early on Sunday morning and last the entire week. The hostess is basically on duty 24-hours a day and serves as the constant person for each Elderhosteler, dealing with residence, security, staff, health problems, phone messages, local information about banks,

stores, hairdressers... In fact, solving any problem to assure the smooth and secure running of the program. Obviously such a person must have lots of patience and tact, as well as knowing the local lore. Over the years there have been many individuals who have performed this duty in a fine fashion.

Our registrars, the people who perform the registration duties, must have experience in accounting dealing as they do with the finances. Our early registrars were Claudette Corbeil and Doug Morris, and from their experiences we developed a method of preparing a financial statement for each client which is still used and makes registration day easy and pleasant. Our volunteers in this department have been with us steadily for sometime, and we are grateful for their continuous attendance at a job which sometimes can demand savior

faire.

The Tour Guides are not expected to be professional guides, they are there to explain the local transportation system and lead people to specific places of interest and see them safely home. They look after between six and eight people. This small number makes it easy to be sure that no one gets lost! It is quite a responsibility for the tour guides, but because many of them have been doing this type of volunteering for a number of years, they are experts in handling their groups.

The volunteers on Campus fulfil many jobs, i.e. relieving the coordinator and the hostess in the day to day running of the program, accompanying Elderhostelers to doctor's appointments if this should be necessary, taking them to the drug store for prescriptions or to speciality shops, like

the lady who had a daughter graduating on a Dean's List, and wanted a special hat to wear at the reception! We found her the exact store and the exact hat! Service is our motto.

Our volunteers have been a most important part of the development of Elderhostel at Concordia, giving us a reputation of being a warm and caring place. Some have gone on to other things, but we have been lucky in being able to replace them with other warm friendly people and we look forward to continuing in this happy state for the next ten years.

This format has been the mainstay of our volunteer program and we find it very successful. We were very flattered when it was singled out by the National Office as a model for other Canadian Elderhostels to follow.

SOME STORIES

There was the time we inadvertently underbooked space, and ended up with two people with no place to sleep. To smooth over this problem, we booked them into one of the finest hotels with a volunteer to get them settled and pick them up to bring them back to campus. We were certainly in the red that year!

One year we had a very cold snap of weather in June. After May 15, the University cuts off the heat in the residence, and it needed all the powers of persuasion of the Coordinator to get the heat turned up again. Before this could happen there was a great deal of borrowing of extra blankets and afghans from our volunteers.

Our American friends from the south

come to Montreal in July and August to escape their own heat and humidity and are sometimes surprised to find how hot it can be here. That's why we have invested in fans, since our residence is not air conditioned.

Then there was the gentleman who insisted that we were the 51st state. Nothing we could say would make him change his mind. He contended that since we wore the same clothes, ate the same food, drove the same cars, we must be Americans. Wishful thinking on his part? This line of thought was supported by another visitor who was so impressed by the flower displays in the streets of Montreal that she said it was like being in a foreign city. She was quite non-plussed when it was pointed out that Montreal was a "foreign city" to her.

One time the Residence gave out a room

to us which they thought was vacant, since the previous tenant's luggage was not visible. However, he had not really left and arrived back at 2:30am to find a female occupant in his room. Lots of panic and excitement you may be sure. A great test of expert handling for our hostess!

We also had the pleasure of hosting an Elderhostel from Australia. One of the classes was a trip to Mount Tremblant in our Laurentian Mountains. A volunteer wrote for our guests the history of the area from 1850 to date and also prepared vignettes of the towns visited on the way up and back.

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THE FUTURE

In the last ten years Elderhostel at Concordia has built an important place in the Elderhostel network. The organization has grown into a worldwide production. With our Australian connection, Elderhostel at Concordia entered into the international family. We look forward to receiving other international groups in the future.

During this decade we have offered a variety of courses and programs. Professors and participants alike have enjoyed the innovative and stimulating atmosphere and we plan to continue to search for new ways to offer older adults lifelong learning experiences.

Since Elderhostel is an evolving concept, we are always alert to trends which would enhance not only our own program, but would benefit the Elderhostel program far

and wide.

As we start the next decade of Elderhostel at Concordia, we look forward to a bright and happy future. Presently there are three of the original committee involved and five of our early professors are still willing to participate in the program. Our volunteers are steadfast in their help with our "weeks". The University supports us in every way from the Maintenance Department to the Rector's office. Looking back we can say "Its been a great ten years" and Elderhostel Concordia look forward to the next ten!

NOTES

QUEBEC PROVINCE

A PLACE TO EXPLORE WITH

ELDERHOSTEL

HISTORY, SCENERY, AND FRIENDSHIP IN

BOTH FRENCH AND ENGLISH

PROGRAMS TO SUIT ALL TASTES, TOWN AND

COUNTRY SPRING SUMMER WINTER AND FALL.

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